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ABSTRACT

French was added to the early childhood curriculum at the New School in Fayetteville, Arkansas, after a review of the literature on the subject indicated potential beneficial effects of teaching foreign languages to young children. Some of the advantages to be gained by the children were greater readiness for school work in general, greater creative abilities, an increase in the level of general intelligence and improvement in general verbal ability. The children were divided into ten groups with a maximum of eight in each group. Four groups of kindergartners had French lessons for half an hour a day, three days a week, and six groups of pre-schoolers had fifteen minutes of instruction per week. Using visual aids to reinforce verbal cues, the children were first taught simple words and then sentence utterances. It was found that this foreign language experience improved intangibles, such as general verbal acquisition skills, and that elements of the established curriculum were strengthened and reinforced. Three sample lessons are outlined: Colors, Animals and Bing (a review game similar to Bingo). (CFM)

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Foreign Languages At the Pre-School Level

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In spite of recent improvements in its economic situation and outlook, the state of Arkansas is still lagging behind many other states not only in foreign language education but also in awareness of foreign cultures. A few years ago, the opening of the Arkansas river as a navigable channel to the sea, has geared the business community toward a new consciousness of foreign opportunities. Contrary to expectations such new opportunities have given rise only to speculations and hopes about a renewed interest in foreign languages in the state. In effect, with the exception of a relatively few large urban areas, Arkansas is still characterized by rural and urban poverty and no marked improvement has been noticed in foreign language interest. More importantly, the state's geographical position has

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contributed to its relative isolation regarding the envigorating contact with other cultural groups which often have acted as bridges across disparate cultures in other places within this proverbial "shrinking world".

Arkansas has no Chicano population and does not benefit from a diverse cultural heritage as do the New England states or other areas which have kept some of their traditions, customs or ancestral identities. The proximity to Louisiana has not offered any appreciable improvement in this dificiency: Arkansawyers have looked upon Cajuns as colorful, odd and backward characters who have very little to offer culturally. Although perhaps to a lesser extent than before, it still might be true to characterize Arkansas as being inflicted with what one local educator has called a "lack of vitalizing contact with other cultures... and of mutual contacts between our several subcultures" which has resulted in a "strongly limiting kind of provincialism: a large number of Arkansawyers may be properly said to be culturally and liguistically

bound."[1]

These statements, not meant to be disparaging especially in times when isolationism and back-to basicness seem to be experiencing a sort of revival, are necessary in order to set the background for the importance of a foreign language experience at the New School in Fayetteville, Arkansas. The experiment is of great interest and is worthwhile observing because of two reasons: pre-schoolers have less native language interference than older students, a matter of consequence since many approaches to foreign language teaching are gearing their efforts toward minimizing the negative effects of that interference; and more appropriately, however, the pre-schoolers are living through a privileged acquaintance, however short and concise this acquaintance may be, where their innate provincialism and the natural ethnocentricities of that age are already being rechanneled toward a more mature awareness of the existence of other people and cultures and to a more accurate perception of their own developing language. It is the realistic hope

that this early experience will be a formative one for future language endeavors and, more significantly, will help shape present and future views of varying cultures, behaviors, belief patterns and attitudes.

Fayetteville has always been more fortunate than other parts of the state because of the intellectual input into the community provided by the University. In other respects, however, it is still a rural town, surrounded by agricultural communities and isolated in the Ozarks mountains.

The New School was founded, as a non-profit corporation in 1971 by a group of parents, teachers and other residents who were interested in establishing a child-care facility which would provide the best possible educational advantages for pre-school children. For the most part, it can be said that the school's students come from educated parents. It cannot be assumed, however, that the students belong to an economic elite. On the contrary, most students are children of university students or drop-outs, and 40% of the student body can be

considered poor by federal government standards. While we are not describing an elitist institution, it is fair to say that most children come from homes where attention is given to them generously. With regards to foreign language learning, no motivation from the home was expected or effected; only class-room experiences could be counted on.

Since its philosophy was that learning should be a pleasurable experience, the New School's teachers were mostly recruited according to backgrounds in which gratification, immediate reinforcement and confidence-building were an integral part of their teaching methodologies. Indeed, most teachers had worked with Headstart and with special education projects. Such experiences and methodologies were transposed to the New School in general and to the teaching of a foreign language in particular.

While generally the interest in teaching foreign languages in the elementary school has waned, the question of whether an early foreign language expereince may be educationally beneficial remains to be

answered. Those who extolled the virtues of FLES during the sixties were primarily interested in the effects of a sequential program upon the achievement in the same language when continued through junior and senior high school. Most of the research supporting the establishment of FLES programs was reviewed by Donahue (1969), herself a FLES educator.[2] The FLES writing during this period attempted to establish that 1) there was an optimum early age for beginning foreign language study; 2) an early foreign language experience had no detrimental effect on first language development; and 3) a FLES experience improves achievement in the same language in secondary school. Donahue (1969) summarized her review of the literature concluding that "Second language learning among young children, while causing no interference with achievement in the basic skills, promotes superior progress in high school language study and results in a significantly higher gain in mental maturity than that realized in the same period by non-FLES students."[3] There exists a substantial body of literature on early language learning which supports

the contention that first language development is not retarded by an early foreign language experience.[4] Stern offers a convincing argument which refutes the claim sometimes made that monolinguals are intellectually superior to bilinguals. He believes that the early childhood curriculum would be enhanced by the addition of a foreign language experience.[5]

There is conflicting evidence regarding the effects of FLES on achievement in the same language in secondary school. Oller and Nagato (1974) maintain that research shows little support for an early beginning in foreign language study. They claim that Donahue's review of the research literature is distorted and that her conclusions are not supported by the results of the research on which they are based. These authors offer the results of their own research into this question which show that significant advantages of FLES over non-FLES students at the 7th and 9th grade level dissapeared by the 11th grade level.[6] It is the conflicting evidence of the research cited here that we wish to avoid. While many of us may consider a sequential FLES program leading into secondary school quite desirable,

we fully realize that for most school situations it is simply not feasible, regardless of what research might tell us.

The question of the optimum age for beginning a second language is at least of secondary importance to our discussion. Those involved directly or indirectly in the implementation of FLES programs are familiar with Penfield's theory regarding the "plasticity of the uncommitted cortex" of the young child's brain during the period of first language acquistion. Penfield maintained that the child is especially susceptible to the learning of two or more languages during this period, and that this foreign language learning opportunity should be a part of his early education, preferably between the ages of four and ten.[7] Persky also believes that children enter into a "bilingual age" during first language acquisition and that this bilingual gift begins to gradually disappear by age twelve.[8] Stern (1970) confirms the conclusions of Penfield and Persky by stating that "the language acquisition device is a maturational phenomenon of infancy and childhood, which gradually atrophies as the organism reaches maturity."[9] Regarding the acquisition of correct pronunciation, there is an abundance

of evidence which supports an early beginning in foreign language study.[10]

Most important to this discussion is the consideration of the possible ancillary effects of an early foreign language experience. Because of the seeming major importance of the questions discussed above the extra-skill benefits of early foreign language study were overshadowed or completely obliqued in the literature of the sixties. Following Peal and Lambert's pioneering study (1962) relating bilingualism to measures of intelligence,[11] Landry hypothesized that "Second language learning at the elementary school level results in an increased development of the potential creativity of children."[12] On the basis of his research, Landry concludes that the learning of a second language during early childhood education should "be viewed as one form of enriched experience which results in the development of more of the divergent thinking abilitities of the individual."[13]

In a current review of the literature the authors have found no evidence which conflicts with Landry's conclusions and have found some evidence which supports an early foreign langauge experience on grounds

other than those mentioned above. Barik and Swain found that children who are involved in an early foreign language experience show a greater readiness for school work in general.[14] Although further research is warranted, if indeed, an early foreign langage experience can contribute uniquely to the creative abilities or the general intelligence of American children, then every school community should seriously consider the feasibility of some type of foreign language experience as an integral part of early childhood education. Buxbaum suggests that the ability to speak and to enunciate a foreign language is a form of speech symptomatology and that it can be employed as a defense mechanism to reinforce repression and weaken the strength of the superego.[15] Such a statement has enticing possibilities when applied at the pre-school level, especially when psychological difficulties surface most noticeably. Greathouse also gives an indication of the value of an early foreign language experience being instrumental in the development of general verbal ability.[16]

In view of the evidence provided by the literature on early foreign

learning, the New School decided to add the teaching of a foreign language to its curriculum. It was not a decision brought about by the desire of merely finding a useful occupation for the students or by the desire of appearing more scphisticated than a state institution still in its infancy, but rather by the potential that a foreign language offering has to complement and stregthen the school's existing curriculum. In many ways, the methodology used in the teaching of French reflects the stated philosophy of the school and, even at times, had to readjust some of its facets in order not to contradict the school's adopted procedures.

When this decision was made, a French and Psychology major at the University of Arkansas was hired as instructor and by means of a course in Special Investigations, worked to research and establish a suitable and competent curriculum for Spring 1975. The classes taught consisted of four groups of kindergartners who met for a half hour a day, three days a week, and six groups of preschoolers who met for fifteen minutes a week. The classes' relative small number (8 maximum) were reinforced by the fact

that participation in the private institution's curriculum was not an obligation but, more often than not, a pleasurable experience. The students' age provided only a minimum of inhibitions and, as scholarship has shown (see above), a greater ease with sound repetition. In this matter, it is important to note that the teaching of French, in its inception, was intended and still indeed figures as being integrated into the school's specified goals to achieve a high development in verbal skills: the efforts put forward for the acquisition of skills in one language should be profitable and mutually beneficial for the acquisition of skills in the other.

Before more intricate sentences were to be presented, it was, of course, logical to start with the teaching of simple words for which the method of presentation was to be purposely varied. In keeping with McComb's and Wicker's findings[17] and with Adkin's description in 1970 of a preschool language module,[18] that visual stimuli were superior to verbal ones, all new words presented were immediately reinforced by their

corresponding pictorial presentation. Initially, the words to be taught numbered 60 and consisted of 10 colors, 4 emotions (fâché, content, triste, étonné...), 6 names of rooms and an identical number of miscellaneous items (la fleur, la table, la chaise, etc...), a dozen names of parts of the body, 8 names of foods and 14 animals. In addition, the children mastered the numbers 1-100 in French. Once the program was set, the number of items in each category was extended to a total of 85 and 2 dozen sentence utterances, such as "Je m'appelle" "Bonjour" "Qu'est-ce que c'est"etc... were added while the counting was reduced to 1-20. The braod topics (body parts, animals, food and drinks, people and indoor and outdoor things), were chosen by the students, discovered, as it was, during a free drawing class. Besides discovering a great deal about the children themselves, these drawings pointed out their interests and served already as pictorial demonstration items. During this process, the insistence on the correct colors in their drawings naturally exhibited an area of interest which was promptly added to the list.

Obviously, the main problem when dealing with children of this age is their attention span. Moreover, in a situation where homework or actual reflective works are non-existent, all instruction and learning must be achieved during the relatively short class meeting. It is, therefore, imperative that the time spent be at maximum efficiency on the student's part both in terms of content and intensity. Finally, while enthusiasts of audio-lingual and related methodologies have attempted to artificially establish a mental environment where rational interference is kept at a minimum and where spontaneity is most cherished, children of this age can easiest be placed in situations where such negative effects can be kept to a minimum. It was decided, and later proved accurate, that the three problems mentioned above, compactness of instruction, short attention-span of children and excessive rational interference would best be dealt with through game-playing. As illustrations, some descriptions as to how specific items were introduced follow:

Colors

Start with a few at a time, maybe rouge, orange and jaune,

but keep a color chart of them all on the wall.

1) Using magic markers, hold one up at a time. Whoever can call out the correct color in French is allowed to hold the magic marker. This "prize" plus encouragement seems to be tremendously reinforcing.

2) Reverse the procedure when all magic markers are being held. The object now is to get rid of all magic markers. They can be given back one at a time as the correct color is said aloud.

3) Lay out the magic markers in the middle of a table. Call out the name in French while the children reach out and grab the correct color. This game has to be discontinued when they know the colors too well because of the fights over who got there first. It is great for small numbers of beginners.

4) Lay out all of the magic markers and ask each child in turn what his favorite colors are. Go around in a circle with the teacher taking a turn also.

Animals

In a shoe box place cards on which there is written the French name of

an animal and an accompanying picture. Have one child draw a card and pantomime the animal it portrays. The first child to guess correctly gets to be the next actor. This game is most effective when the pantomimes have been standardized. Also, when two or more children yell out the correct answer at the same time, it is better to let the actor be the tie-breaker. Fewer arguments result over who said the right answer first when this practice is utilized.

Review Drill

BING: This game is a form of Bingo in which each box on a score card has a number and a picture corresponding to a French vocabulary word. The teacher draws a card which has a number and a letter, for example, N-21. Everyone looks for N-21 and identifies the picture in French (le lapin) for which they receive a marker to cover the square on the scorecard. A straight line in any direction is BING or a win. For variation and for students who know the vocabulary very well and are becoming bored by the game, the numbers are given in French. To minimize the feeling that somebody "lost" we usually cover all twenty squares on each card. This also is a far better

vocabulary review. Better results can be obtained if the markers are handed out by the teacher rather than picked up by the children. In this way correct pronunciation can be insisted upon before they receive the marker. If they take it themselves, they will not repeat the word or correct their errors.

It is to be remembered that only a few words are presented at a time and are stressed again regularly by being incorporated into other subjects under presentation. As is evident from such games, animation is an essential aspect of the lesson objectives: physical activities increase the attention span and allow "natural", spontaneous forces to emerge through the excitement produced by the challenges in games.[19] Challenges to win the game,[20] allied to a natural competitive situation among youngsters, seemed to provide enough of a reward to make outside reinforcement superfluous--a desirable effect since reinforcements for correct answers such as tokens or candies might be disruptive to New School policies. Even in situations where competition was not involved, physical movements and animated behaviors were important

adjuncts to effective teaching. Thus, learning to count in French was best achieved when accompanied by a rhythm hand-clapping.[21]

Frequent repetition carefully balanced by introduction of new material should also be rythmically interspaced. In order to avoid boredom, confusion and frustration which often resulted during the presentation of new items, the instructor reverted frequently to familiar material. This strategy restored confidence as was evidenced by the fact that the children did not mind repeatedly reproducing known patterns provided they were presented enthusiastically. This procedure seemed to be preferable even though the number of new items to be introduced was at times severly curtailed.

When hesitations or recall troubles existed, beginning fragments or cues given by the instructor or, better, by a fellow student, were found to be highly appropriate.[22] Again, the important factor was not to allow the animation to dwindle or the youngsters' dynamic involvement to relax. This factor is so imperative that lesson plans often had to be relegated to the realm of good intentions and not followed

rigidly. More often than not, repetition or improvisation were more in order than the strict adherence to detailed plans. This decision led to a seemingly paradoxical situation: a class that was conducted in both a leisurely and dynamic fashion.

In summary, the learning experiences at that age seemed to have been enthusiastic and productive. It was felt that the foreign language experience has improved intangibilities such as general verbal acquisition skills; but, more measurably, elements of the established curriculum, where values and customs of other countries are studied, were strengthened and reinforced. The foreign language experience also integrated prevailing and accepted instructional modes such as hand coordination and artistic self-expression into the methodology of the New School. Moreover, the director of the New School had the courage and foresight to respond to an old and often deplorable state of affairs as evidenced by the lament of Futerman (1968): "Despite active research findings on the advisability of teaching foreign Languages to the kindergarten, such teaching is becoming increasingly rare."[23]

In no way do we call for an effort to make all pre-school education bilingual. Arkansas does not possess the same heritage as Louisiana, the New England States or South Texas. We do suggest that the foreign language experience as presented in the New School has been appreciably beneficial to its students. Incomplete and inconclusive testing evidence already seem to show that New School graduates are superior achievers in verbal and creative skills. However, plans are now being made to institute more objective and controlled testing procedures in an attempt to provide additional evidence regarding the effects of an early foreign language experience.

Notes

[1]L. E. Guinn, "Why Study a Foreign Language in Arkansas," (unpublished paper, University of Arkansas, 1968), p. 3.

[2]Mildred R. Donahue, Foreign Languages in the Elementary School: Effects and Instructional Arrangements According to Research, ERIC Focus Reports on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Number 3, The Modern Language Association of America, 1969.

[3]Ibid, p. 5.

[4]Charles E. Johnson, et al, "The Effect of Foreign Language Instruction on Basic Learning in Elementary School," The Modern Language Journal, 42 (January 1963): 8-11.

[5]H. H. Stern, Foreign Languages in Primary Education (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

[6]John W. Oller and Naoko Nagato, "The Long-Term Effect of FLES: An Experiment," The Modern Language Journal, LVIII (January-February, 1974).

[7]Wilder Penfield, "The Uncommitteed Cortex: The Child's Changing Brain,"

Atlantic Monthly, 214 (July, 1964): 77-81.

[8]Ruth L. Persky, "Foreign Language in the Elementary School," The Modern Language Journal, 33 (January, 1954): 369-371.

[9]Stern, Foreign Languages in Primary Education, p. 63.

[10]See for example, Thomas A. Brigham and James A. Sherman, "An Experimental Analysis of Verbal Imitation in Preschool Children," Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 2 (1968): 151-158; John B. Carrol, "Research on Teaching Foreign Languages," in Stanly Levenson and William Kendrick, Readings in Foreign Languages in the Elementary School (Waltham, Massachusetts: Blaisdell, 1967): 70-127; Stanley, Messer, "Implicit Phonology in Children," Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior, 6 (1967): 609-613.

[11]Elizabeth Peal and Wallace Lambert, "The Relation of Bilingualism to Intelligence," Psychological Monographs, 76 (1962).

[12]Richard G. Landry, "The Enhancement of Figural Creativity through Second Language Learning at the Elementary School Level," Foreign Language Annals, 7 (October, 1973): p. 112.

[13] _____, "A Comparison of Second-Language Learners and Monolinguals on Divergent Thinking Tasks at the Elementary School Level," The Modern Language Journal, 43 (January-February, 1974): p. 10.

[14] Henri Barik and Merril Swain, "Bilingual Education Project: Evaluation of the 1973-74 French Immersion Program in Grade 1-3 in the Federal Capital's Public Schools," EDRS: ED 100 175 (November, 1974).

[15] Edith Buxbaum, "The Role of a Second Language in the Formation of Ego and Superego," Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 18 (1949): 279-286.

[16] Larry J. Greathouse, "Relationships Between Language Development and Verbal Associative Learning of Third and Fourth Grade Pupils," Dissertation Abstracts, 29 (1969): 3912.

[17] Maxwell E. McCombs, "Verbal and Object Availability in the Acquisition of Language: Implications for Audio-Visual Communication," Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior, 19 (1969); 54-63; and Frank W. Wicker, "Continuous Restricted Associations to Pictorial and Verbal Items," Audio-Visual Communication Review, 18 (1970): 431-439.

[18]Dorothy C. Adkins, et al,"Initiative Research in Curriculum Development: A Preschool Language Module," EDRS: Ed 055 483 (December, (1970).

[19]Susan Ervin-Tripp, Language Acquisition and Communicative Choice (Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1973); p. 97. The author noted that a period of delay between the model and its requested imitation is likely to produce a dangerous interference of interpretation. It has been our observation that games decrease the negative interference of interpretive reactions by eliciting direct responses. The video-taped excerpts which accompany this presentation show a child so engrossed in a game as to shout out the answers in French and in English with an amusing and spontaneous gusto.

[20]G.S. Leventhal, A.L. Popp, and L. Sawyer, "Equity or Equality in Children's Allocations of Rewards to Other Persons?" Child Development, 44 (1973): 753-763. These authors asked whether rewards should be given on an equity or equality basis. They opted for the rewards to be given to the

better of the performances.

[21]Adkins, et al, "Initiative Research in Curriculum Development," See also Ervin-Tripp, Language Acquisition and Communicative Choice, p. 99.

[22]Apparently a potentially rich device could be the peer-tutoring approach; see Evan Keisler and Phyllis R. Blumfield, "A Peer Tutoring Game for Four-Year-Olds." EDRS: ED 065 181 (March, 1972).

[23]Z. Futerman, "Remarks for Foreign Languages," Doshkol'noe Vospitanie, 18 (1968), p. 141.